



AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION

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'Since the introduction of printing,' Oscar Wilde observed, 'and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes ... there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear, which is really the sense ... which it should seek to please.'

Perhaps Wilde would have taken comfort from the fact that, after some years of research, several well-known professors of literature at Yale have concluded that reading may be impossible. Or at least, to borrow the words of Professor Paul de Man, 'the im-

possibility of reading should not be taken too lightly.' Professor Jacques Derrida endorses the thought, adding that the critic should aim not to read but to 'deconstruct' the text before him. Others of similar persuasion have joined them in producing a book — called *Deconstruction and Criticism* — in which a new critical stance or theory is presented to those prepared to take the impossibility of reading a little more lightly than the authors.

According to the dust-jacket, the authors are known among their antagonists as the 'hermeneutical Mafia'.

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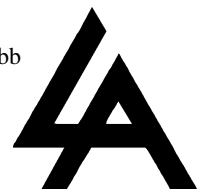
This publication is the text of a talk given on BBC Radio 3 in 1980, on the subject of the book *Deconstruction and Criticism*, by Geoffrey H. Hartman and others, published by Routledge, London, in 1980. It is reprinted, with the author's permission, from his *The Politics of Culture and Other Essays*, published by Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1981. In an earlier edition of this, we accused Carcanet Press of not including the date, and described them as "wankers". We have since found the date, albeit in an untypical and unlikely part of the book. We accordingly withdraw this accusation and apologise for it.

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They are also known by other names, but it would be wrong to think of them as a school. They consist of critics catalysed into verbal activity by Jacques Derrida, a late product of the linguistic criticism which flourished in Paris during the sixties. But Derrida speaks only in inverted commas, denying in the act of utterance any commitment to the words which stream from him. He mentions schools only to deny his membership of them. Despite that, he has a growing influence, and this book is evidence of the respect in which he is held in America. It will also be read and perhaps made canonical by all those many English critics who still admire the Parisian intellectual movements of the sixties.

DERRIDIZING A TEXT

The relation between criticism and literature has always been an uncertain one; and it is unlikely that it will be changed by the invention of a critical label. All the same, the rumour that criticism is now deconstructing literature is ominous. Perhaps we should take some heart from Professor Hillis Miller's assertion in this book that 'the word "deconstruction", like other words beginning with "de-", "decrepitude", for example, or "denotation", describes a paradoxical action which is both negative and positive at once.' But that only serves to remind us of those words beginning with 'de-', like 'destruction' and 'depravity', from which all suggestion of positive meaning is absent. I hope I shall be forgiven if I add to this list of destructive words a neologism, the verb 'to derridize', derived from 'to rid' and 'to deride'. I shall be discussing the attempt to rid literature of meaning in order to deride the common reader.

Let me first justify the invention of this new word. The central essay in this book consists of an extended text and an extended footnote, each printed over the same hundred pages. The subject is — well, there is no subject exactly. The pretexts are Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life' (a vain-glorious poem which Shelley refuted by drowning before getting to the point of it); and also a story by Maurice Blanchot called 'L'Arrêt de Mort'. The second title is ambiguous. It can mean 'the death sentence', or 'the stopping of death'. Derrida (the author of the article) therefore describes it as unreadable. Shelley's title, by implication, is also unreadable. If you translate it, as by now you will have done, into French, it comes out as 'Le Triomphe de la Vie', which can mean either the triumph of life, or the triumph *over* life. Of course it does not read like that in English. But that makes no odds, since reading is impossible. The point of derridizing a text is to make this impossibility apparent. Here are some of Derrida's own words, which will illustrate my meaning:

Even before it 'concerns' a text in narrative form, double invagination constitutes the story of

stories, the narrative of narrative, *the narrative of deconstruction in deconstruction*: the apparently outer edge of an enclosure, far from being simple, simply external and circular, in accordance with the philosophical representation of philosophy, makes no sign beyond itself, towards what is utterly *other*, without becoming double or dual, without making itself be 'represented', re-folded, superposed, *re-marked* within the enclosure, at least in what the structure produces as an effect of interiority.

I think you will agree, when you read this aloud, that while you have made certain sounds, even uttered certain words, it is far from clear that you were reading anything. Reading *can* be impossible.

The sounds that you emitted were a translation from the French. The sentence 'Reading is impossible' comes out in French as 'Lire est impossible'. By a natural transition we could re-write this as 'Délire est possible'. This transition is not logical. However, as I shall show, derridization proceeds by non-logical slides from sense to sense, making no distinction between meaning and association. The word 'délire' is another of those interesting words beginning with 'de-'. As verb it means 'to un-read'; as noun it means 'delirium', from the extraordinary verb *délirer*, which names an activity for which English has no term. The implication is that deconstructive criticism, by adopting the stance of delirium, unread its text, and therefore ... Well, and therefore. What is involved in 'unreading', 'deconstructing', a text?

CLOSING THE DOOR BETWEEN THE READER AND MEANING

Our distinguished professors from Yale agree on one point, which is that the language of literature is often, perhaps always, figurative, and that this presents a difficulty to the reader and an opportunity for the critic. Professor Harold Bloom, commenting on the nature of figurative language, writes: 'I do not agree wholly with de Man that reading is impossible, but I acknowledge how very difficult it is to read a poem properly ...'.

Suppose we were to discover that it is easy to read a poem. Think of the consequences for criticism! There is a vested interest in the theory that figurative language is difficult. Even if figures of speech seem simple to you and me, we should expect to find theories that make them appear quite beyond our comprehension. In the ancient science of rhetoric, we find bewildering classifications of the figures of speech, using technical terms from the Greek, and accompanying these terms with explanations as vague as they are pretentious. The Greek terms are still in use, fulfilling their ancient purpose of inspiring panic in the common reader. The professors of Yale do not hesitate to use them. They refer to trope, metonymy,

metaphor; synéchdoche, prosopopoeia and catachresis. Professor Bloom, encouraged by these terms, manages to transfigure the figurative in a theory which spirals away into abstraction. He writes:

Metonymy and metaphor alike I would trope as heightened degrees of dialectical irony, with metaphor the more extended. But synecdoche is not a dialectical trope, since as microcosm it represents a macrocosm without necessarily playing against it.

If we think of figures of speech in that sort of way, then it is no wonder if we come to the conclusion that they present an obstacle to reading. We might even, in our bewilderment, beseech the people who invented these complexities to remove them. We find that the deconstructive critic is more than willing to oblige. Paul de Man describes his own attack on 'The Triumph of Life' as a 'disfiguring' of Shelley. Shelley's poem begins like this:

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory and of good, the Sun sprang forth
Rejoicing in his splendour ...

Most readers would imagine that if there is a serious critical question raised by those words, it is on account of their falsehood. The sun never does 'spring forth', and the movement of Shelley's lines seems entirely inappropriate to the rhythm of sunrise. We shall want to know whether there is anything in the form or content of the poem that overcomes the seeming ineptness of this description. For de Man, however, the main interest lies in the fact that the sun is personified. Or, to use a technicality of rhetoric, the lines exhibit prosopopoeia. How can we read the text, then, until we have disfigured this figure? De Man has uncovered a difficulty of which the innocent reader had been unaware. No doubt such a reader will not be relieved to learn that disfiguration consists in 'the repetitive erasures by which language performs the erasure of its own positions'. But by the time he gets to that thought, he might be so muddled by rhetoric as to blame himself for failing to understand it.

BELIEVING THAT THE DOOR IS LOCKED

The fundamental idea behind deconstructive criticism seems to be this: figurative language closes the door between the reader and the meaning. We must open the door, with the Yale key provided. But it seems to me most odd to believe that the door is locked. Figures of speech are open to their meaning. They are vivid, immediate, unambiguous. They are used all the time, and indeed clichés are composed of them. A sly fox, a loving heart, a sullen anger, a serious face — all those are figures of speech. Some seem more figurative than others. But they are all figurative (in the literal sense of the term). They

transfer a word from the context which provides its meaning to a context where its meaning is exploited in some novel way. You might think that figures of speech must therefore bear a double meaning. But that is not so. The literal meaning is usually lost in the transfer. When I read 'His heart was in his mouth', the literal sense of the words does not occur to me. If I understand them literally I shall be guilty of a misreading. Sometimes, it is true, a writer can play with figures of speech so as to trap us into a literal reading. And the effect of this might be very powerful. It might seem as though a reality were being displayed behind the commonplace. Consider the effect produced by Geoffrey Hill when, in describing the search for the bodies of drowned men, he suddenly forces us to literalize the metaphor 'scraping home':

Quietly they wade the disturbed shore;
Gather their dead as the first dead scrape home.

But if a figure of speech can be given this kind of impact this is because it does not normally possess it. The figures I have mentioned are no more inherently ambiguous than literal descriptions.

THE MEANING THAT IS THERE

There is a moral that I wish to draw from those observations. Meaning, it seems to me, is a collusive activity. It requires speakers, hearers, and the social context which permits understanding. The reader brings to literature an experience of language which the writer cannot ignore: the meaning of a text is the meaning which a speaker of the language can find in it, and this is as true of *Finnegan's Wake* as it is of *Gulliver's Travels*. If criticism seeks to elucidate meaning it is elucidating something public and publicly accessible. It must therefore presuppose a reader for the text which it purports to analyse, and it must direct its remarks towards that reader. The critic may guide the reader, but he cannot dictate to him, since the critic's words, like the words he studies, gain their significance from the public practice of speech. This practice defines the reader of literature. The 'common reader' to whom I have referred is the reader who conveys to the text the accumulated meanings of the language. Criticism that is not addressed to the common reader strays from its point, losing sight of language and literature together.

This prompts a second observation. I said earlier that deconstructive criticism ignores the distinction between meaning and association, and it is time I explained what I meant because if language is public, then this distinction must be real, and fundamental to every form of literature. An association is not part of a poem's meaning but a more or less arbitrary contribution by a particular critic. Let us take an example. In John Ashbery's poem 'Sunrise in Suburbia' there occurs a line which marks the change from

passionless routine to a glimpse of history and faith. The line reads: 'And then some morning there is a nuance'. The thought is surprising. Why should a mere nuance effect the transition from dearth to fullness, from death to life? It is the purpose of the poem to display the answer to that question in cogent imagery. Bearing the answer in mind, we might reflect on the line which introduced the transition and try to understand its power. We find a concealed double meaning in 'nuance'. Taken as a participle this may be understood as the 'making new'. That leads us to subtract the syllable 'new' from 'nuance', so hearing the echo of the word 'once' in what remains. The 'newing' happens once, at once. Ashbery has avoided an obvious banality, writing 'some morning' where he might have said 'one morning'. This now seems newly significant. By avoiding the word 'one' he has covertly introduced it. The 'once' that is heard at the line's conclusion affirms the 'once' that is rumoured in its beginning. The line reverberates with the expectation which it does not quite describe. 'And then some morning there is a nuance'. I don't know whether what I have just said is true or useful. But I do know that it is not for me to determine the matter. I am appealing to an independent idea of relevance. I was trying to describe the meaning of Ashbery's line, not a private association. The difference is between that which endorses, and that which distracts from, the meaning that is there. The meaning is there because the language embodies it. This language, which is the property of the common reader, is inherently resistant to critical whimsy, and if it resists my interpretation, then the fault is mine.

Deconstructive criticism does not admit the collusive standpoint of the common reader. It prefers to deny his existence. That is what it means to say that reading is impossible. Such criticism therefore makes no distinction between meaning and association, between the arbitrary and the relevant. It is an exercise in critical narcissism. Consider the derridized version of Blanchot's 'L'Arrêt de Mort'. As I said, this title has two clear meanings, which endorse each other and reflect the character of the narrative. (The story, I should say, concerns the courage of a young woman in the face of certain death.) These two meanings are genuine meanings; they are not private associations. Derrida associates the title with a third idea that is, I think, absolutely foreign to it, the idea of a ridge or backbone — *arête*, in French. He then looks for this ridge in the story. It is not described there: it would add nothing to the meaning if it were. (The word *arête* is normally used in common speech when cooking or eating fish.) So Derrida concludes that the ridge must be concealed in the structure of the story. It is this structural ridge which is of supreme importance, and which provides the point of departure for the impossible task of reading. There is no admissible distinction between meaning and association,

and so nothing that we could say to suggest that he is straying from the point.

Such sideways slithering through associated ideas is in fact wholly characteristic of deconstructive criticism, which treats the text as a pretext, and speaks a private 'metalanguage' of its own. The term 'metalanguage', now extremely fashionable among critics, is an interesting one. It belongs to the philosophy of logic, and means a language which talks about another language. The implications of the term are, in the present context, fairly clear. The critic is refusing to speak the language of the reader, or of the writer, of poetry. He uses only a metalanguage of his own — a firm stance from which the frailty of readers and writers can be more accurately observed.

THE CRITICAL METALANGUAGE IS AN EXPRESSION OF THE WILL TO POWER

But there is a penalty to pay for that. The language of the critic has become private, since anything is permitted by its rules. Any association, any technicality, can be presented as though it were a contribution to the meaning of the whole. You, the common reader, do not share this language. Therefore you are in no position to know whether what is said is meaningful or true. But that only means that the private language of the deconstructive critic creates the distance that it pretends to discover, the distance between text and meaning. Why, then, should it have been invented, and why have so many critics been persuaded to adopt it?

I can think of an answer, but it is not a pleasant one. A language which rids literature of meaning alienates the reader from literature. He is therefore free to bestow his attention upon the critic. But the critic is glamorized by his 'metalanguage', since it seems to be a repository of knowledge that the reader is despised for lacking and unable to acquire. In denying literature, criticism thereby affirms itself. It begins to seem indispensable.

The critical metalanguage is, then, an expression of the will to power. To understand meaning requires patience and humility, while to revel in association is to release the inner man. It is to accept no authority that is not self-imposed; it is to grow in stature and immunity. As private association takes precedence over public meaning, so does the art of reading shrink into nothingness. And as the reader feels smaller, so does the critic loom large.

Deconstructive criticism does indeed have a negative and a positive side. Perhaps we can best describe them by borrowing again from the words of Professor Hillis Miller: 'There is no deconstruction which is not at the same time constructive, affirmative. The word says this, in juxtaposing "de" and "con".'